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Gonococcal perianal abscess: re-emergence after cessation of co-trimoxazole

We report a case of perianal abscess due to *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*, which appears to have been suppressed but not eradicated by chronic low dose co-trimoxazole for a period of almost 6 months between acquisition and diagnosis.

The patient was a 34 year old HIV infected homosexual man treated with didanosine, stavudine, and nevirapine with a HIV viral load of 500 copies per ml and a CD4 lymphocyte count of 280 × 10^6/l. He was taking co-trimoxazole 400 mg/80 mg once daily to prevent *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP).

He reported last having receptive anal sex in June 2000. This was unprotected, with a casual partner at a "gay" sauna. Three weeks later he reported a perianal abscess which discharged spontaneously, requiring dressings for a few days. A sinus was observed and he was booked for elective surgery. He remained well for 5 months.

Co-trimoxazole PCP prophylaxis was stopped in November 2000 as his CD4 T lymphocyte count had remained above 200. Two weeks later (and almost 6 months after the last reported anal sex) he presented with purulent discharge emerging from a sinus approximately 3 cm from the anus.

N gonorrhoeae (sensitive to penicillin, ceftriaxone, and ciprofloxacin) and *Bacteroides* species were cultured from this discharge. Swabs from the rectum, throat, and urethra as well as urine were negative for *N gonorrhoeae* and *Chlamydia trachomatis* by polymerase chain reaction (PCR).

Oral ciprofloxacin was started but pain, swelling, and perianal cellulitis led to his admission to hospital where he was treated with intravenous ceftriaxone and metronidazole and surgical drainage.

Gonococcal perianal abscesses were reported in the pre-antibiotic era[1] but have disappeared from contemporary descriptions of gonorrhoea, whereas Bartholin's, periurethral, and tubo-ovarian gonococcal abscesses are described.[2]

The isolation of *Bacteroides* species and the worsening of the infection despite ciprofloxacin suggest that anaerobic organisms probably played a part in the development of an abscess, consistent with animal inoculation experiments.[3] Another possible factor was the moderate immunosuppression (CD4 count of 280) from his HIV infection.

Six months passed from the time of infection to diagnosis, during which the patient was largely free of symptoms which then developed when co-trimoxazole was stopped. The likely explanation is that the co-trimoxazole was suppressing the gonococcal infection without curing it. The failure to detect *N gonorrhoeae* by PCR from the rectal specimen raises the possibility that co-trimoxazole may have eradicated a rectal infection in this case while only suppressing an extragenital manifestation.

It is now standard practice to stop PCP prophylaxis when CD4 counts rise above 200 × 10^6/l in patients taking antiretroviral therapy.[4] This may in turn have some impact on both the transmission and the manifestations of gonorrhoea in these patients, perhaps even contributing to increases in gonorrhoea in HIV infected populations.[5]

T Read
Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, 580 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

A Mijch
Alfred Hospital, Prahran, Victoria 3181, Australia

L Ostergaard
Research Unit Q, Department of Infectious Diseases, Aarhus University Hospital, Skejby Sygehus, DK-8200 Aarhus N, Denmark

Correspondence to: T Read; tread@mshc.org.au

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Uptake of HIV testing in patients with a confirmed sexually transmitted infection

UK seroprevalence rates indicate that up to 50% of HIV positive patients in genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics remain undiagnosed.[1] HIV is mainly identified in high risk patient groups. Sexually transmitted infections other than HIV (STIs) have been shown to facilitate and be associated with enhanced HIV transmission.[2] Risk assessment for HIV, therefore, should target patients with an STI or history of recurrent STIs as a high risk group.

Targeting these patients to test for HIV at the time or 3 months after their STI diagnosis, is important as it will lengthen the "diagnosis interval" of patients testing HIV positive thereby conferring a better outcome, with respect to HAART[3]; identify patients with recent concurrent acquisition of HIV and a STI, entering a highly infective seroconversion phase; identify individuals with undiagnosed, established HIV infection and a newly acquired STI which promotes higher infectivity due to increased HIV viral shedding into genital secretions.[4 5]

Our study analysed the uptake of HIV testing among attendees who had a genitourinary screen at St Thomas's Hospital genitourinary medicine department between 1 and 31 December 1999.

It compared the uptake of HIV testing, either at the index visit in December or deferred to within the ensuing 3 months, between patients diagnosed with an STI (gonorrhoea, chlamydia, herpes simplex virus, and trichomoniasis (study group)) and patients receiving a negative STI screen (control group).

Of 318 attendees, 242 and 76 patients comprised the study and control groups respectively. Only 18% (59/318) of patients tested for HIV on the initial visit. Significantly fewer of the study group tested for HIV (14%) compared to the control group (33%) ($p<0.01$).

Of those who did not test for HIV, 11 and one patients deferred testing in the study and control groups respectively (table 1) However, none of the deferrers or initial non-testers re-attended for HIV testing in the following 3 months.

In view of this unacceptably low rate of HIV testing, both overall and in those patients with a confirmed STI, the following interventions are now being introduced, aiming to improve these figures and comply with the sexual health strategy 2001 targets.[6]

- An "opt out" policy of HIV testing
- Additional waiting room posters and a new patient information leaflet about HIV is given to all patients at registration to read while they wait to be seen explaining the natural history, treatments available, benefits of early diagnosis, and mechanisms of reducing transmission. This enhances patient education and may expedite consultation length and waiting times for patients with restricted "time off" and/or other more pertinent issues to discuss
- Pretest counselling is reserved for high risk groups instead of being required routinely
- Patients are able to obtain their HIV results indirectly, without the inconvenience of a previously required second visit
- Educating all GUM staff to encourage a high offer rate of HIV testing to all patients, especially targeting high risk patients, which incorporates those with a confirmed STI.

Table 1 Timeliness of HIV testing

	Tested for HIV at time of attendance	Deferred at time of attendance	Attended within 3 months and tested for HIV
Study	34/242 (14%)	11/242 (5%)	2/46 (4%)
Control	25/76 (33%)	1/76 (1%)	2/11 (18%)